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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MODERATE LEADERS ON CHAPTER VII: ONLY
ONE CHANCE TO GET IT RIGHT

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)

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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Influential Maronite leaders Nassib Lahoud and Sheikh Michel Khoury acknowledged that Chapter VII is now the only realistic means to establish the Special Tribunal, and has to be introduced soon. But both moderate leaders strongly cautioned that only one chance exists: if the Security Council falls short of the required nine votes, not only will the tribunal disappear from consideration, but the mood in this politically-exhausted country will swing dramatically and quickly to the March 8-Aoun coalition. Regarding Lebanon's upcoming presidential contest, Sheikh Michel believes it is still possible to pull enough increasingly-nervous Aounist MPs away from the opposition to produce a two-thirds quorum, but greater leadership has to be displayed by the ever-cautious Patriarch Sfeir. Lahoud said that a hard push from the influential (but curiously absent from the Lebanon scene) Vatican foreign office while Sfeir is in Rome could do the trick. Lastly, both long-time veterans of Lebanon's complex political scene predict a superficially quiet summer, with multiple secret negotiations transpiring between the various players. End summary.

¶2. (C) Former MP Nassib Lahoud, a committed democrat and often-mentioned candidate for the presidency, and Sheikh Michel Khoury, son of former President Bechara El Khoury (1943-1952) and a dark-horse compromise candidate himself, met with the Ambassador and Special Assistant on April 27 at the latter's residence in East Beirut. The meeting was held as funerals for two murdered youths associated with the political movement of Walid Jumblatt were taking place in another district of the city. Despite wide-spread fears that the killings would incite a new cycle of violence, both Lahoud and Khoury expressed cautious optimism that the statesmanlike calls for calm and due process by Lebanon's leaders may carry the day. Both politicians remarked that Walid Jumblatt had been particularly effective in controlling the situation and should be commended for his notable restraint.

"FAILURE WOULD BE CATASTROPHIC"

¶3. (C) Due to implacable opposition to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon by the Syrian regime, Michel Khoury said he is convinced that parliamentary approval is an impossibility.

He indicated that pro-Syrian Speaker Nabih Berri will never defy his Syrian political masters and Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah is just as constrained by his ill-chosen alliances.

Khoury flatly stated that a concerted effort to establish the court through Chapter VII action must begin as soon as politically feasible, but certainly before French President Jacques Chirac steps away from power in mid-May. He agreed with the Ambassador that last week's visit of UN OLA chief Nicolas Michel to Beirut and the just-completed visit of SYG Ban Ki-moon to Damascus were useful because those discussions would demonstrate to still-undecided members of the council that all other avenues to the tribunal have been exhausted.

¶4. (C) But Khoury, whose encyclopedic knowledge of the political and tribal relationships (and secrets) in Lebanon is extraordinary, was also adamant that PM Fouad Siniora, and the other leaders of the pro-reform majority, have to clearly and immediately declare their desire for Chapter VII to the remove the doubts of wavering members of the UN council. Khoury implied that the days of nuanced messages were over and a clear, compelling argument has to be presented by the Siniora government to the international community.

¶5. (C) Nassib Lahoud concurred with the observations of his old friend, but emphatically cautioned that the votes in the UNSC have to be carefully counted and then double-checked. He warned that for all intents and purposes, Lebanon's Cedar Revolution would be finished if the anticipated showdown in the Security Council ends with insufficient votes or a lethal veto by Russia or China. He believes a failure in New York would give Syria's proxies in Lebanon great confidence and make them immovable with regard to reform or compromise. The Lebanese public, reading the writing on the wall, would shift in mass toward the March 8-Aoun end of the political

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spectrum. On the other hand, establishment of the tribunal under UN protection would provide an enormous push to his country's struggling democratic reform movement.

THE PRESIDENCY

¶6. (C) Turning to the issue of the presidency, the well-connected Khoury suggested that Michel Aoun was slowly, but noticeably making several members of his Christian political bloc nervous with an unexpected string of errors, poorly-thought out positions, and unexpectedly lengthy periods of embarrassing silence. Although he admitted it would be difficult, Khoury said it just may be possible to convince enough members of FPM, or independents such as MP Elie Skaif and those from the Tashnaq (Armenian) party, to at least participate in the presidential-selection session of parliament scheduled for this September. Khoury argued that Aoun, with his propensity for bombast and almost painful ambition, has made some moderate FPM deputies unsure of their political future once the former general departs the scene. Lahoud acknowledged that there are "many moving pieces" right now and much may happen behind the scenes in the coming months before the election.

¶7. (C) Lahoud continued, however, that if March 14th attempts to form a broader alliance, either by attracting disaffected opposition MPs, or by courting Aoun himself, the resulting presidential candidate may well have to be a compromise figure. And as everyone concedes, he remarked, a true compromise candidate in polarized Lebanon is a rare thing indeed.

¶8. (C) If on the other hand, the pro-reform movement has to play the cards they are presently dealt (i.e. its current roster of 70 delegates, far short of the heavily-argued two-thirds quorum), then Lahoud said they should select a president that is 100 percent pro-reform. It may lead to increased stalemate and even violence, but Lahoud argued it made no sense to simply allow the opposition to fully control

both the presidency and the Speaker, who because of the exceptional powers vested in his office, was able to tightly restrict parliament's majority.

¶9. (C) Khoury stressed that the Maronite Patriarch has to project greater leadership in the coming months, otherwise the presidency would essentially become the property of the Sunni and Shia communities. He said that Patriarch Sfeir's reluctance to take a stand on the presidency was in effect helping the opposition and had to come to an end. Khoury suggested the Vatican, which exercises considerable influence with Lebanon's Maronite community, could provide the support that Sfeir feels he needs to make what he considers a very risky commitment. Khoury remarked that there would be no better time for this than the present, during Sfeir's annual visit to Rome for discussions and guidance. He argued that even the self-assured Aoun would find it exceedingly difficult to oppose a clear statement from Rome and a newly-committed Sfeir.

A QUIET SUMMER?

¶10. (C) Both Lahoud and Khoury suggested that barring regional complications from Syria, Iran or Israel, they actually thought Lebanon might enjoy a relatively uneventful summer. Certainly there would be a complicated and confusing series of negotiations at several levels between the numerous players, but overall they believed all the political leaders, even Hassan Nasrallah, need time to recover from the tumultuous year just past, and prepare for a dynamic political season this fall. Khoury, in particular, also expressed his hope that on-going EU negotiations with Iran over the nuclear file would continue and succeed, because the impact of an agreement would significantly benefit the entire region.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Sheikh Michel and Nassib Lahoud summed up clearly what is really at stake with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon: if both domestic and UNSC efforts ultimately fail to establish the tribunal, then the Lebanese public will

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sense that the political pendulum is swinging decisively back in the direction of Syria and its allies. Fence-sitters -- of which there are increasing numbers in this land that takes seriously its Phoenician history of deal-making -- would jump down on what we would consider the wrong side. That would be a dangerous development in the run-up to presidential elections this autumn and make it that much harder for a credible candidate committed to Lebanon's sovereignty and independence to emerge as the winner.

FELTMAN